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# Fieldwork Requirements in Special Education Preparation: A National Study

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Mary Anne Prater & Thomas W. Sileo

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**Abstract:** National reports (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*) and legislation (e.g., *No Child Left Behind*) call for improved teacher preparation. One area of concern relates to inadequate preparation of teachers for the reality of the classroom. We were interested in determining the role of practicum experiences in special education teacher preparation. Surveys were mailed to randomly selected Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs). Faculty responded to questions regarding teacher candidate field experiences. Results indicated that in most cases, faculty and/or staff members in the special education unit are responsible for locating and assigning students to field placements. The most typical response to minimum qualifications for cooperating or mentoring teachers was an appropriate teaching license and at least 3 years of teaching experience. Most cooperating/mentoring teachers are paid an honorarium averaging \$147. University faculty members supervise about 12 students each for fieldwork prior to student teaching. However, during student teaching, most supervisors are assigned approximately 7 students. The results of this study present a snapshot of current practice in fieldwork in special education preparation. Additional research is needed particularly to examine the role fieldwork plays in future teacher success.

Concerns about the quality of public schools and teacher preparation in the United States expressed in the last two decades may be traced to the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This report criticized the current state of education and indicated that if a foreign power had inflicted such a mediocre educational performance on America it would be viewed as an act of war. Although the report's major criticism focused on school curricula, it also provided recommendations for improved teacher education. In this and subsequent reports, teacher preparation programs have been criticized for (a) focusing too much on pedagogy and not enough on subject matter, (b) being disconnected from the realities of schools, and (c) providing too little fieldwork for teacher candidates, among other weaknesses (Hitz, Hughes, King, & LeMahieu, 2000).

Subsequent to national reports calling for teacher education reform was litigation mandating reform in these areas. The 1998 reauthorization of Title II of the *Higher Education Act* establishes a reporting system for states and institutions of higher education to collect information on the quality of their teacher preparation programs, including teacher performance on state licensure tests and the number of teachers hired on provisional or emergency credentials. The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* requires that all states and local education agencies provide report cards regarding the qualifications of their teachers; in addition teachers in schools that receive funds under the law must meet state standards as being highly qualified for their positions (Rose, 2002).

In the U.S. Secretary of Education's 2002 Annual Report on Teacher Quality, institutions of higher education are viewed as responsible for the lack of qualified teachers.

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"The data . . . suggest that schools of education and formal teacher training programs are failing to produce the types of highly qualified teachers that the *No Child Left Behind Act* demands" (US Department of Education [DOE], 2002, p. viii). According to this report, schools of education have many deficiencies, one of which is the failure to prepare teachers for the reality of the classroom. Yet the report's recommendations include making attendance at schools of education and unpaid practice teaching optional.

Recommending the elimination or reduction of unpaid field experience is counter to the currently increasing focus on fieldwork in teacher preparation programs. Historically, student teaching has been the only opportunity to demonstrate and practice teaching skills. But today teacher educators have increased the amount of required fieldwork beyond student teaching so that extensive field experiences for teacher candidates are not unusual. Yet little research has been conducted to demonstrate whether more fieldwork improves student performance. Some research indicates that prior field experience may (a) increase students', cooperating teachers', and university supervisors' perceptions of the candidates' preparedness for teaching (Hersh, Hull, & Leighton, 1982); (b) increase the likelihood of one being rated a superior special educator (Westling, Koorland, & Rose, 1981); and (c) improve student teaching performance (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1993). Additional research is needed, however, to substantiate the impact of extensive fieldwork in special education preparation.

Although increased use of fieldwork generally has been well accepted by teacher educators, the role and purpose of field experiences have been challenged. For example, the triadic model in which every practicum student is assigned to a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor has been criticized, partially because they are "two individuals who often possess different pedagogical beliefs and rarely engage in substantive dialogue" (Kagan, Freeman, Horton, & Rountree, 1993, p. 500). In response to these criticisms, as well as other concerns, universities have initiated innovative programs, often partnering with local school districts to pre-

pare future teachers better through movements such as the Holmes Partnership, the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER), and the Goodlad Partnership. In these models schools and universities blend resources and expertise to study and develop teachers' instructional practices in professional development schools. Approximately 30% of IHEs accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) report being involved in professional development schools (Levine, 2002).

In 1992, Buck, Morsink, Griffin, Hines and Lenk analyzed the special education fieldwork literature and identified many "unresolved issues," four of which appear consistently throughout the literature. Our review of published literature indicates that these issues remain unresolved a decade later. The first unresolved issue involves the role of early field experience. Specifically, "we cannot answer questions about the number and type of field experiences necessary to have a positive influence on future teaching behavior, the sequence of field experiences, their length, or what responsibilities field-based students should assume" (Buck et al., 1992, p. 113).

The second unresolved issue concerns the length of time students participate in student teaching or internships. According to Buck et al. (1992), many professionals do not believe one semester is sufficient, assuming that "the longer, the better." Others argue that length of time does not correlate positively with improved performance. The third and fourth unresolved issues include the amount of supervision and the selection of the field sites and cooperating teachers. Research results are inconsistent in identifying the optimum amount, consistency, and "closeness" of supervision and whether such factors impact future teachers' classroom performance. In addition, although professionals agree that the selection of field sites and cooperating teachers is important, little research has examined these variables in special education teacher preparation (Buck et al., 1992).

Researchers must study the impact of field experiences, including selection of field sites and cooperating teachers, on future special educators' classroom performance. Prior

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to implementing such experimental research, we believe it is also crucial to take a snapshot of current practice regarding these issues. Therefore, given the “unresolved issues” in special education field experiences and the criticism of traditional teacher preparation programs, we wished to examine how field-based programs in special education preparation are structured in institutions of higher education (IHEs). Specifically, we were interested in answering the following questions:

1. Who identifies field placements and assigns students to those placements?
2. What are the qualifications of cooperating/mentor teachers, what type of training is required, and what type of compensation is provided?
3. Who supervises fieldwork, how many students do they typically supervise, what type of grade is earned, and how many credit hours are required?
4. What are strengths and limitations of programs as defined by the IHE respondent?

## **Methods**

### **Survey**

In order to answer the research questions, we designed a 20-question survey with the goal of writing questions that would solicit accurate responses while making the survey user-friendly. Based on our collective experience teaching in numerous IHEs across the country, we believed that some responses would be very similar across institutions. For those questions we generated pre-selected choices (e.g., “What type of compensation does your institution provide cooperating/mentor teachers? Check all that apply: financial stipend, tuition-free university credit, other—please specify”). Questions which we believed would solicit more varied responses were written as open-ended questions (e.g., “Please list your institution’s minimum qualifications for a cooperating/mentor teacher”). Questions for which an open-ended response would be difficult to interpret, we generated pre-selected choices (e.g., “Who conducts supervision of fieldwork? Check all that apply: generally all faculty members in the unit that

prepares special educators, selected number of faculty members in the unit preparing special educators, faculty members in a unit separate from those preparing special educators (e.g., Field Services), other—please describe”). A brief introductory letter asked that a faculty or staff member knowledgeable about field experiences in special education complete the survey.

Prior to distribution of the survey, a draft copy was distributed to 3 IHE special education faculty members who were involved in teacher preparation as course instructors and field supervisors. Collectively the 3 faculty members had been involved in special educator preparation in 8 IHEs for approximately 18 collective years. They were given the survey and asked to provide feedback regarding the understandability and ease in completing it. Only formatting changes (e.g., placement of questions on the page) were made based on their feedback.

### **Procedures**

The survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to every third institution of higher education (IHE) listed in the *National Directory of Special Education Personnel Preparation Programs* (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1991) that granted a baccalaureate or master’s degree in special education. Of 226 survey mailed, 9 were either returned as undeliverable or sent back with a note indicating that the IHE no longer offered a special education teacher preparation program. We presumed that the remaining 217 surveys were delivered. Four weeks later a second survey was sent to non-respondents. The first and second mailings returned 64 and 51 surveys, respectively. The 115 returned surveys represented a 53.0% return rate.

## **Results**

### **Demographics**

Surveys were mailed to at least one IHE in all 50 states, plus Puerto Rico. Useable surveys were returned from 43 states and Puerto Rico. Surveys were not returned from Colorado, Delaware, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Vermont.

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**Table 1.** Type of Special Education Preparation Programs Offered by IHEs Responding to Survey

Type of Special Education Program	Number (Percentage)
Baccalaureate only	58 (52.7%)
Post-Baccalaureate only	5 (4.5%)
Graduate only	9 (8.2%)
Baccalaureate and Post-Baccalaureate	6 (5.4%)
Post-Baccalaureate and Graduate	18 (16.4%)
Baccalaureate and Graduate	8 (7.3%)
Baccalaureate, Post-Baccalaureate, and Graduate	6 (5.4%)

N = 110

Respondents identified the program(s) delivered at their university or college. Approximately one half of the participants indicated that they prepare special educators at the baccalaureate level only. The next most frequent response was IHEs that offer both post-baccalaureate and graduate programs. Details regarding the type of special education preparation programs offered by IHEs responding to the survey may be found in Table 1.

Participants indicated the organization that accredits/approves their programs. Most IHEs are accredited/approved by more than one organization. When examined individually, the most frequently identified organization was the State Department of Education (DOE) (n = 91, 83.5%), followed by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (n = 74, 67.9%), and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (n = 50, 48.8%). More specific data are presented in Table 2.

Respondents were asked whether their IHE belonged to the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) or the Holmes Partnership. Few indicated their

IHE is or has been a member of either organization. Many did not know or did not respond to this question (see Table 3).

**Field Identification and Placement**

Respondents were asked to identify the person(s) responsible for locating and assigning fieldwork. They were given the options of (a) faculty and/or staff in the unit responsible for special education preparation, (b) faculty and/or staff in a separate unit (e.g., Field Services Division), or (c) those responsible for supervising field experiences, (d) the formal partnerships between the IHE and the local schools or districts, and (e) other, to be specified by the respondent.

Results indicated that primarily the faculty and/or staff members in the special education unit identify field placements (n = 62, 55.9%), either alone (n = 27, 24.3%) or in conjunction with others (see Table 4). The next most frequently identified body was faculty and/or staff in a unit separate from special education (n = 40, 36.0%). Yet only 12 (10.8%) respondents indicated that this unit separate from special education

**Table 2.** Type of Accreditation and/or Approval of IHEs Responding to Survey

Accrediting and Approval Organizations	Number (Percentage)
State Department of Education (DOE) only	23 (21.1%)
National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) only	9 (8.3%)
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) only	0
State DOE and NCATE	25 (22.9%)
State DOE and CEC	9 (8.3%)
NCATE and CEC	9 (8.3%)
State DOE, NCATE, and CEC	32 (29.3%)
Other only	2 (1.8%)

N = 109

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**Table 3.** Organizational Membership of IHEs Responding to Survey

Organizational Membership	Current Member (Percentage)	Former Member (Percentage)	Don't Know (Percentage)	Did Not Respond
Holmes Partnership	7 (6.1%)	6 (5.3%)	28 (24.3%)	73 (63.5%)
National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER)	5 (4.3%)	0	39 (33.9%)	71 (61.7%)

N = 115

**Table 4.** Responsibility of Identifying Field Placements

Responsibility for Identifying Field Placements	Number	Percentage
Sole Responsibility		
• Special education faculty or staff (special education)	27	24.3%
• Faculty or staff in unit outside of special education (outside unit)	12	10.8%
• Field supervisors	9	8.1%
• Formal partnerships between IHE and schools (partnership)	3	2.7%
• Other*	3	2.7%
Dual Responsibility		
Special education with:		
Outside unit	8	7.2%
• Field supervisors	9	8.1%
• Partnership	3	2.7%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Outside unit with:		
• Field supervisors	3	2.8%
• Partnership	10	9.4%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Field supervisors with:		
• Partnership	1	0.9%
• Other*	2	1.8%
Partnership with:		
• Other*	1	0.9%
Tri-Responsibility		
Special education and outside unit with:		
• Field supervisors	5	4.5%
• Partnership	2	1.8%
Special education and field supervisors with:		
• Partnership	2	1.8%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Separate unit and field supervisors with:		
• Partnership	2	1.8%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Other		
• Special education, separate unit, field supervisors, and formal partnership	2	1.8%
• Special education, separate unit, field supervisors, and other*	1	0.9%
• Special education, separate unit, field supervisors, partnership, and other*	1	0.9%

N = 111

\* Other included advisors, students, program directors, district special education directors, students' employment sites, and school and university committee.

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**Table 5.** Responsibility of Assigning University Students to Field Placements

Responsibility for Assigning Field Placements	Number	Percentage
<b>Sole Responsibility</b>		
• Special education faculty or staff (special education)	29	26.8%
• Faculty or staff in unit outside of special education (outside unit)	13	12.0%
• Field supervisors	8	7.4%
• Formal partnerships between IHE and schools (partnership)	3	2.8%
• Other*	4	3.7%
<b>Dual Responsibility</b>		
Special education faculty or staff with:		
• Outside unit	10	9.3%
• Field supervisors	10	9.3%
• Partnership	3	2.8%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Outside unit with:		
• Field supervisors	4	3.7%
• Partnership	6	5.6%
Partnership with:		
• Field supervisors	3	2.8%
• Other*	1	0.9%
<b>Tri-Responsibility</b>		
Special education and outside unit with:		
• Field supervisors	5	4.5%
• Partnership	1	0.9%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Special education and field supervisor with:		
• Partnership	1	0.9%
• Other*	1	0.9%
Separate unit and field supervisors with:		
• Partnership	1	0.9%
<b>Other</b>		
• Special education, separate unit, field supervisors, and partnership	1	0.9%
• Special education, separate unit, field supervisors, partnership, and other*	2	1.8%

N = 108

\* Other included curriculum committee, students, program directors, students' employment sites, mentor teacher recommendations, and school and university committee.

takes sole responsibility for identifying field placements. Field supervisors locate or assist with locating (n = 35, 31.5%) practicum field sites. The least frequently identified, particularly as sole identifier of field placements was formal partnerships between the IHE and local schools (n = 3, 2.7%).

The assignment of students to field placements follows the same pattern as identification of field placements. Faculty and staff in the special education unit are primarily responsible either solely (n = 29, 26.8%) or in combination with others (n = 65, 60.2%). The most common combinations are faculty and staff in the special ed-

ucation unit and those in a separate unit (n = 10, 9.3%), as well as faculty and staff in the special education unit and field supervisors (n = 10, 9.3%).

### ***Cooperating/Mentor Teachers***

Participants were asked questions regarding courses or seminars that cooperating/mentor teachers complete before or while supervising preservice teachers. Approximately one-fourth of the IHEs require that cooperating/mentor teachers complete a course or a seminar prior to supervising preservice teachers. On the average teachers receive



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**Table 6.** Requirements of Cooperating or Mentor Teachers

	Course/Seminar Prior to Supervising Preservice Teachers	Course/Seminar While Supervising Preservice Teachers
Number (Percentage) of IHEs Requiring Course/Seminar	N = 28 (25.7%) N = 109	N = 3 (2.8%) N = 108
Mean Number (Range) of University Credits Teacher Receives for Course/Seminar	1.38 (0–3) N = 24	2.0 (1–3) N = 2
Mean Number (Range) of Contact Hours for Course/Seminar	25.1 (2–48) N = 24	31.0 (14–48) N = 2
Mean Number (Range) of Weeks Course/Seminar Held	11.2 (1–16) N = 16	15.5 (15–16) N = 2

1.38 credits for participating in an 11.2 week course/seminar with 25.1 hours of contact.

Only 3 respondents indicated cooperating/mentor teachers are required to participate in a course or seminar while supervising preservice teachers; 2 of the 3 provided detailed information regarding this requirement. Mentor teachers at one IHE receive 1 credit for 14 contact hours across 15 weeks. Mentor teachers at the second IHE receive 3 credits for 48 contact hours across 16 weeks.

Respondents were also asked what type of compensation their IHEs provide cooperating/mentor teachers; 12 respondents (11.1%) indicated none. Of those that do provide compensation, the most common is a financial stipend only (n = 45, 41.7%), followed by tuition-free university credit only (n = 19, 17.6%). Both monetary compensation and tuition free university credit are provided by 14 (13.0%). The next most frequent response was “other” (n = 12, 11.1%). Respondents indicated that cooperating/mentor teachers are compensated in ways such as university privileges (i.e., adjunct faculty status, access to university facilities), recognition and appreciation (i.e., reception, dinner, gift certificates, certificate of appreciation, small gift), and professional development activities (i.e., free workshops, vouchers toward professional publications). Respondents from 6 IHEs (5.5%) indicated that they provide a financial stipend plus some additional recognition such as those listed above.

Institutions that award a financial sti-

pend average \$147 per term or semester, with a range of \$40 to \$750. Some respondents indicated that the State Department of Education pays or contributes to the financial stipend. Institutions that provide free university credit average 2.7 credits, with a range of 1–5 credits.

Respondents were asked to list the minimum qualifications for cooperating/mentor teachers. Of the 115 total respondents, 99 answered this question. The most commonly listed qualification (n = 71, 71.1%) was years of experience, which ranged from 1 to 5 years, with a mean of 3.2 and mode of 3.0 years. Almost one-half of the respondents (n = 47, 47.5%) mentioned that cooperating/mentor teachers need a teaching license, certificate, credential, or endorsement in the appropriate area. The next most frequently mentioned qualification was a nomination or recommendation from school and/or university personnel (n = 21, 21.2%), usually the principal. A requirement for a master’s degree for cooperating/mentor teachers was indicated by 18 (18.2%). Of these, three (3.0%) require a master’s degree only if the university student is completing a master’s degree program. Additionally, eight respondents (8.1%) mentioned tenure as a minimum qualification, and three (3.0%) indicated that teachers need to have participated in some form of additional professional development work before functioning as a cooperating/mentor teacher. Additional responses received from one or two respondents included *matching department’s teaching philosophy*,

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**Table 7.** Persons Responsible for Conducting Fieldwork Supervision

Persons Responsible	Number	Percentage
Sole Responsibility		
• All special education faculty members	44	43.1%
• Selected special education faculty members	33	32.3%
• Faculty in unit separate from special education	2	2.0%
Dual Responsibility		
All special education faculty members with:		
• Faculty in unit separate from special education	5	4.9%
• Other*	6	5.9%
Selected special education faculty members with:		
• Faculty in unit separate from special education	7	6.9%
• Other*	5	4.9%

N = 102

\* Other included adjunct faculty, doctoral students, and graduate assistants.

*willingness to participate, taught in that setting at least one year, and qualifications defined by the state.*

The most specific list of criteria require for a cooperating/mentor teacher provided by a respondent read: "Must be regular education and special education endorsed. Must use effective data-based procedures in the classroom (e.g., DI, ABA, & Precision Teaching), must monitor progress objectively and regularly. Completed at least 3 years as a special education teacher." The most general response received read: "Good reputation."

### Field Supervisors

Respondents were asked to identify who conducts supervision of fieldwork. They were given the following options: (a) generally all faculty members in the unit that prepares special educators, (b) selected number of faculty members in the unit preparing special educators, (c) faculty members in a unit separate from those preparing special educators (e.g., Field Services), and (d) other, to be specified by the respondent. The majority of IHEs involve all special education faculty in the supervision of field experiences (n = 55, 51.4%), followed by selected special education faculty (n = 33, 30.8%) (see Table 7).

The number of teacher candidates for whom each supervisor is responsible was requested. Results indicated that during pre-student teaching fieldwork experiences, the average number is 11.7, with a range of 1–

35 students per supervisor (sd = 8.5). The number is lower for full-time student teachers, averaging 7.5 with a range of 1–20 students per supervisor (sd = 4.9).

Participants were also asked whether students earn a letter or pass/fail grade during fieldwork before and during student teaching. Over two-thirds (69.7%) of the respondents indicated they assign letter grades to fieldwork before student teaching (n = 69, N = 99), and just over one half (55.2%) assign letter grades to student teaching (n = 58, N = 105).

### Fieldwork Credit Hours

Respondents were asked how many fieldwork credit hours are required in their special education licensure preparation program. Results ranged from 3 to 30 credits, with a mean of 12.8 credits (sd = 5.8).

### Strengths and Limitations

In an open-ended question respondents were asked to list three areas of strength and three areas in need of improvement in their special education preparation programs. Common strengths that emerged included (a) rigorous competency-based, field-centered programs that are delivered in collaboration between university faculty members and public school teachers; (b) excellent field experience and student teaching sites in preK-12 settings that are built upon an infrastructure of qualified former program



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graduates who serve as early field experience and student teaching mentors; (c) multiple field settings that include a variety of age, grade level, and special education assignments (e.g., inclusive, self-contained, resource classes) across elementary, middle, and high school levels; (d) access to a wide range of communities with diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural populations; and (e) practical hands-on field-based experiences that are integrated with and distributed across numerous methods courses, allowing for the application of theory in practical settings.

Survey respondents also identified aspects of their special education preparation programs in need of improvement. Many of the areas identified as in need of improvement in some programs were similar to areas perceived as strengths of other programs (e.g., identifying additional high quality model demonstration sites, placements, and cooperating/mentor teachers; providing additional time and guided field experiences linked with university courses; providing experiences with low incidence disabilities, as well as racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse student populations in inclusive settings). Other areas indicated as being in need of improvement included (a) recruiting and retaining a more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse university faculty and special education preservice teacher population; (b) developing dual preparation programs that culminate in general and special education teacher licensure; (c) developing a college-wide model for field experiences and student teaching in contrast to separate and disparate models; and (d) obtaining college support (financial and personnel) to decrease faculty-student supervision ratios.

## Discussion

The results of this study paint a picture of a typical IHE special education teacher preparation program. Most typically, special educators are being prepared in an undergraduate program that is approved/accredited by the state and NCATE. The faculty and/or staff members in the special education unit are responsible for locating and assigning students to field placements for practicum experiences and for conducting the su-

pervision. Students register for 12–13 credit hours of fieldwork throughout their program. Minimally, cooperating/mentor teachers are required to have earned the appropriate teaching license and have at least three years of teaching experience. If the institution is among the 25% that require cooperating/mentor teachers to complete a course or seminar prior to supervising students, the teacher would receive 1–2 credit hours and meet about 25 hours over 11 weeks. The cooperating/mentor teachers receive a financial honorarium which equals approximately \$147 per semester. For fieldwork prior to student teaching, university faculty members supervise about 12 students each and assign letter grades. During student teaching, supervisors are assigned to approximately 7 students, and either letter or pass/fail grades are awarded.

The results of a previously reported study of the same data set (Prater & Sileo, 2002) contribute additional details to the picture of a typical special education preparation program. Prior to student teaching, students are required to work in the schools about 163 hours and are observed approximately 3.5 times. During student teaching, students spend about 457 hours in the field and are observed about 6.5 times. When combining these data with the results of the current study, students work approximately 50 clock hours in the field for each credit hour. On the average, they are observed by a university supervisor once for every 46.5 hours prior to student teaching and once for every 70.3 hours during student teaching.

The results of this study indicate that special education faculty and staff generally locate and assign field placements, as well as supervise their own students' field activities. A unit separate from the academic solely identifies and assigns field experiences in 10.8% and 12.0% of the IHEs, respectively, while 2% of the respondents indicate that a separate unit solely supervises fieldwork. It would be interesting to compare these results with general education teacher preparation fieldwork requirements. In our experience those engaged in special education teacher preparation are less willing than those in general education teacher preparation to yield the responsibility for field identification,

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placement, and supervision to faculty or staff in units outside the unit responsible for academic preparation.

Other comparisons could be made between the results of this study and similar aspects of general education preparation programs. Each question addressed in this study could also be asked of general education preparation. Of broader interest is the role of special education and general education in the context of the larger IHE unit responsible for teacher education: Are possible differences in administration of fieldwork due more to autonomy granted individual units or to lack of consistency, leadership, or unity among programs? Some research indicates that special educators are less involved (e.g., in the NNER and Goodlad Partnerships) than their general education counterparts (Prater & Sileo, 2002; Smith & Edelen-Smith, 2002).

The results of this study must be examined in context of its limitations. Prior to implementation, experienced IHE faculty members were asked to review the survey. The survey instrument could have been piloted more extensively and statistics computed to provide validity and reliability information. Also, a limited number of IHEs responded to the survey. Only a 53.0% return rate was obtained resulting in 115 respondents, representing approximately  $\frac{1}{6}$ th of the IHEs that provide special education teacher preparation in the 50 states and Puerto Rico. There is no wide consensus regarding acceptable response rates (Drew, Hardman, & Hart, 1996). In addition, a large proportion of IHE respondents provided baccalaureate programs only ( $n = 58$  (52.7%)), which may or may not be representative of the nation at large.

Analysis of the data shows a few discrepancies that may be inherent in an open-ended survey. For example, the number of IHEs indicating that they require a seminar/course before a teacher becomes a cooperating/mentor teacher and the number that list such a course as a criterion for becoming a cooperating/mentor teacher do not match. When asked directly, 25.7% and 2.8% indicated that a cooperating/mentor teacher must complete a course or a seminar prior to or while supervising preservice teachers, respec-

tively. Yet when asked to list the minimum qualifications for cooperating/mentor teachers, only 3.0% indicated teachers need to have participated in some form of professional development.

Additional information could have been sought to interpret the results more precisely. For example, respondents were asked how many credit hours students registered for prior to and during student teaching. We did not ask, however, for the total number of credits required in the program. If we had done so, a ratio of coursework to fieldwork could have been computed and provided additional information.

The intent of this study was to examine current field experience requirements in special education teacher preparation. Questions regarding quantity (e.g., number of students assigned to each university supervisor) were addressed, whereas questions regarding quality (e.g., the value of the feedback provided by the university supervisor) were not addressed. However, the self-identification of strengths and limitations of special education preparation yielded some qualitative statements. Future research should examine qualitative features in more detail in order to acquire a broader perspective of the current state of fieldwork requirements in special education teacher preparation.

The apparent increase in fieldwork required by teacher preparation programs appears counter to the recommendation of the US Department of Education to decrease or eliminate unpaid practice teaching (US DOE, 2002). The fundamental assumptions and the research used to support the US DOE recommendations have been challenged. For example, Arthur E. Wise, President of NCATE, argues that teachers are no different from other licensed professionals such as doctors, engineers, accountants, and pilots. All "require grounding in the profession's knowledge base and in how to apply it as required through extended supervised practice" (NCATE, 2002, n.p.) Berliner (2002) concurs:

Today . . . hundreds of teacher education programs . . . have strong field-based programs . . . These ensure that students understand propositional and procedural knowledge (how to do things such as

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preparing a lesson plan) in real-world context[s] . . . Teaching is not a craft to be learned solely through apprenticeship. (pp. 364–5)

In addition to such dissenting statements, the research base used in support of the US DOE recommendations does not meet rigorous standards (Darling-Hammond, 2002). In fact, Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) reject the conclusions of the US DOE report claiming that “it fails to meet its own standards for the use of scientific research in formulating public policy” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 187).

The results of this study provide a snapshot of current fieldwork practices in IHE special education teacher preparation programs. Additional research is needed to identify the impact of the fieldwork on future teacher success. Comparative studies, for example, could examine the difference in student performance based on (a) varying lengths of time spent in the field both before and during student teaching or internships, (b) differing number and quality of supervisory visits, and (c) varying types of field placements. The paucity of research in this area may be at least partially due to the difficulty of maintaining experimental control with research precision through traditional research methodology. It is difficult, for example, to (a) identify rigorous yet easily measured dependent variables, (b) control extraneous variables that impact the dependent variable, and (c) maintain treatment fidelity. Other obstacles in teacher preparation research relate to the manipulation of program requirements that have previously been approved by both the IHE and accreditation or approval bodies for research purposes.

Difficulties studying teacher preparation are not unlike difficulties encountered by education research in general. As stated by Berliner (2002) in his criticism of the “evidence-based practices” and “scientific research” phrases mentioned over 100 times in the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001:

Doing science and implementing scientific findings are so difficult in education because humans in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interaction. The participants in

**Table 9.** CEC Field Experience Standard with Acceptable and Target Criteria

Element of Standard	Acceptable	Target
Developmentally sequenced field experience	Field and clinical experiences begin early and are integrated with coursework thus providing candidates the opportunity to acquire, practice, and refine competencies.	Field and clinical experiences are systematically planned, implemented and integrated throughout the program. They are linked to the goals of the program and provide candidates the opportunity to acquire, practice and refine competencies in a developmental recursive manner.
Full range of abilities, ages, types and levels in a variety of settings	Field and clinical experiences provide candidates opportunities to work in a variety of settings that address a range of ages, types and levels of abilities commensurate with the license for which they are preparing.	Field and clinical experiences provide candidates opportunities to work in a variety of settings with the full range of ages, types and levels of abilities commensurate with the license for which they are preparing.
Supervised by qualified personnel	A preponderance of the field and clinical experiences are supervised by personnel with experience and knowledge base commensurate with the license for which the candidates are being prepared.	All of the field and clinical experiences are supervised by personnel with experience and knowledge base commensurate with the license for which the candidates are being prepared.

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those networks have variable power to affect each other from day to day. (p. 19)

Organizations that accredit, approve, or recognize teacher education programs have moved away from detailing field experience requirements as part of the review process. For example, in the past, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) delineated 15 practicum standards. The new field experience standards are much briefer, focus on the kinds of experiences provided, and no longer require specific number of hours or weeks (CEC, 2003). The current standard reads:

Special education candidates progress through a series of developmentally sequenced field experiences for the full range of ages, types and levels of abilities, and collaborative opportunities that are appropriate to the license or roles for which they are preparing. These field and clinical experiences are supervised by qualified professionals. (CEC, 2003, n.p.)

The *acceptable* and *target* criteria for the three major elements of this standard are listed in Table 8. A gross interpretation of the criteria is that *more and varied (commensurate with the license) is better*. Although it may appear self-evident, we do not have empirical evidence that such is the case.

Research examining fieldwork in teacher education can be complicated, time consuming and expensive, and for decades teacher education has been marginalized and underfunded (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Nonetheless, teacher educators should identify creative yet rigorous means of conducting research regarding the role of IHEs and fieldwork in teacher preparation—a necessity, given the current political climate. Identification of the point at which fieldwork becomes necessary and sufficient for maximizing the potential of future special educators must be accomplished in order for IHEs to continue to support their roles in teacher preparation.

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*Mary Anne Prater, Brigham Young University.*  
*Thomas W. Sileo, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.*